



MANI-PEDIS GO GREEN

Health problems linked to nail salons – many of which employ Asian Americans – foster a movement toward eco-friendly shops.

Writer **Momo Chang** Illustrator **Chloe Bonfield** Photographer **Mona T. Brooks**

WALKING INTO the Isabella Nail Bar in Oakland, CA, on a rainy spring morning, I notice a remarkable difference between this salon and others I've visited.

No bad nail salon smell.

Uyen Nguyen opened her shop in 2008, and it's one of a number of eco-friendly nail salons popping up around the country. There's no national data on how many green salons exist — in large part because there's no green certification for this type of business. Self-identified green salons such as Nguyen's might include bamboo floors, less-toxic nail polish and a living wage for employees.

The mission behind Nguyen's nail salon goes beyond saving the environment. Years ago, Nguyen's sister-in-law, who worked in nail salons for more than 15 years, discovered that her baby had died in her womb when she was eight months pregnant. Nguyen believes that the fetus died because her sister-in-law was exposed to toxic chemicals in the salon, specifically from doing acrylic, or fake, nails.

Since then, she's heard many stories of relatives and friends getting sick after working in salons. As someone who loves getting her nails done, she'd always suspected something was wrong in this line of work when she would enter salons and smell the fumes.

"It's a silent killer," Nguyen says of the chemical exposure that nail workers are subjected to. "So whatever I can, I do. The cost [of opening a green salon] of course is more, but the long-term effects are worth it."

In 2007, Time magazine named nail salon work as one of the worst jobs in the United States because of the toxic products used in most shops. Nevertheless, the industry has tripled in size during the last two decades and rakes in \$6 billion annually. About 42 percent of the 349,370 manicurists in the United States are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 96 percent are women, according to Nails Magazine, a nail industry publication. In California, 60 to 80 percent of nail salon workers are Vietnamese American. These workers are exposed to a constant dose of toxins, every hour, for eight or more hours a day.

One of the most toxic chemicals found in nail salons is formaldehyde, which has been linked to cancer by numerous studies on both humans and animals and is classified as a carcinogen by

the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Other toxins include toluene and dibutyl phthalate, which are known to cause birth defects and miscarriages and are considered reproductive toxins by the state of California. All are volatile organic compounds that evaporate into the air and are inhaled by nail salon workers.

Despite these known factors, much is still unknown. There is no research proving definitively that working in a nail salon leads to cancer or causes miscarriages. There is a lack of research on the cumulative, long-term effects of working in a salon.

But there is some community-driven research. A study that included Vietnamese nail salon workers in the Boston area, conducted by the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, with nonprofit organization Viet-AID, found that the workers suffered from a host of health issues, including breathing problems, headaches and skin rashes or irritations. Though the government sets chemical exposure levels, the regulations don't seem to protect workers, according to Cora Roelofs, lead author of the study.

"These workers are clearly overexposed because the exposure is affecting their health," Roelofs said. "The [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] exposure limits are irrelevant in this work environment for many reasons — they are outdated, don't add together different chemicals that have the same effect, don't account for skin absorption and were never meant to be protective against the myriad acute health effects experienced by these workers."

A CALL FOR STANDARDS

The products we slather on our skin to make it look and smell nice are actually concocted of thousands of chemicals. Each day, the average American adult uses about nine cosmetic products, together composed of about 126 chemicals, according to a survey by the Environmental Working Group. And that's in addition to the toxins encountered everywhere else, from furniture emitting chemicals to the air outside.

Nail salon workers are especially at risk because they consume more toxins than the average person. When manicurists bend over clients' hands to paint their nails, they breathe in the chemicals that evaporate into the air. When they apply nail glue or polish remover, they absorb the chemicals through their skin.



Uyen Nguyen is the owner of Isabella Nail Bar, a green nail salon, in Oakland, CA.

Currently, the US cosmetics industry is allowed to sell products without testing for safety, and manufacturers use known toxins — which they claim are safe — in small doses. Only 11 percent of the approximately 12,500 chemicals used in cosmetic products have been tested for safety. In the United States, the cosmetics industry regulates itself through the Cosmetic Ingredient Review, which tests ingredients for safety but is also funded by the cosmetics industry.

In comparison, the European Union has banned about 1,000 chemicals from being used in cosmetic products; the United States has banned about 10. US health advocates are pushing for federal legislation similar to the European Union's Cosmetics Directive, which is a more preventative approach.

Health organizations called for federal regulation of cosmetic chemicals at a conference in April organized by the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative and co-sponsored by the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum and Women's Voices for the Earth. The goal of the gathering in Oakland, which included workers, shop owners, advocates, scientists and government workers, was to set a national agenda for nail salon worker safety.

"It would be great to have a model where the burden is on the manufacturers to prove the products on the market are safe, instead of waiting for people to get sick 20 or 30 years later," says Lenh Tsan, the workplace health and safety project manager at Asian Law Caucus, a civil rights advocacy group in San Francisco.

Advocates don't believe it can be left to individuals to read the fine print on labels and make the right choices.

"We can't just shop our way out of this problem," says Stacey Malkin, founder of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, at the meeting. "Until we change the laws, we'll continue to have the same issues, where some products are safer, and some are not."

NOT WAITING FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Some former workers have become advocates themselves. Alisha Tran is a former manicurist who is now part of a research team with Asian Health Services, a community clinic in Oakland's Chinatown, and the Northern California Cancer Center. Part of Tran's task is to convince nail salon workers to participate in the project, which

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entails wearing a small air monitor badge that tests for chemicals in the air.

Tran's work is indicative of current efforts to empower and educate nail salon workers. Historically, the green movement has ignored people of color and ethnic communities. But much of the recent advocacy for the health and safety of nail salon workers has been led by women of color. Some of these Asian American groups have also been working with African American hair salon workers, who face similar issues.

Tran became an advocate after she was sent to the emergency room twice within two months. Both times, she was working on someone's nails in the shop when her face and hands went numb and she could not move her fingers. Her clients had to call an ambulance.

The second time Tran went to the hospital, the same doctor attended to her. After finding out she worked in a nail salon, he recommended that she leave her job.

"I quit two weeks later," Tran says.

Tran hopes that her research will prove to nail salon workers that their jobs put their health at risk. She says being an advocate can be tricky — she can't just tell people to leave their jobs because most Vietnamese nail salon workers have limited English skills and lack other options. Even if nail salon workers are concerned about the chemicals, they fear that speaking up or even asking if they can wear gloves to limit exposure to chemicals will cause them to lose their jobs, Tran says. And most nail salon workers do not get health insurance from their employers.

"We cannot change people, we cannot tell people you have to quit your job because your job is not good," Tran says. "Asian women sacrifice a lot for their children. If they have a headache, they take a pill, or they rest. Then they keep working."

SALON OWNER: GOING GREEN IS WORTH IT

"Another sacrifice," says Nguyen, the owner of Isabella Nail Bar. The sister of one of her employees, who works in a different salon, was recently diagnosed with a large brain tumor that Nguyen believes was caused by chemical exposure in the salon.

Nguyen, a former chemistry major who worked in the semiconductor industry for 10 years, is unique in the nail salon world because she's outspoken about health issues. She has experienced resistance to her ideas, including people telling her that her business will fail because she doesn't do acrylics due to the chemicals associated with them. (Acrylics are lucrative because many cus-

Uyen Nguyen uses Zoya nail polish, which doesn't contain the harmful chemicals formaldehyde, toluene and dibutyl phthalate.

tomers return weekly to maintain them).

She also charges more: \$39 for a manicure and pedicure that can cost \$22 at other salons in the area. Yet her business is expanding, and Nguyen plans on opening a second salon in San Francisco in 2010.

Nguyen is also straddling the line between making a business and going green. The nail polishes she uses, a line called Zoya, do not contain toluene, dibutyl phthalate or formaldehyde. However, she has chosen not to use water-based nail polishes, which are probably safer, but she says that they wear off quickly and don't function as well.

The nail polish remover Nguyen uses does not contain acetone and is ethyl acetate-based, which she says doesn't smell as bad. But ethyl acetate is linked to respiratory and skin irritations, so it's unclear whether this is a safer alternative, according to toxicologists interviewed for this article.

However, many of the facial lotions and treatments Nguyen uses are organic. She also designed her own water pipe and ventilation systems to ensure that her foot spas are thoroughly cleaned and the air fully ventilated, which is key to reducing chemicals in salons.

Advocates say that eco-conscious salons aren't a catch-all solution to the host of problems nail salon workers face. They're also less feasible for most cash-strapped small-business owners. Ling estimates it costs between \$40,000 and \$70,000 to open a medium-sized salon. To open a green salon, she says, it would cost anywhere from \$250,000 to \$500,000, though Nguyen says she opened her fairly large-sized salon in an upscale neighborhood for \$120,000.

"Some salons just don't have the capacity, financial resources and time to convert their salons to green salons," Ling says.

Ling also cautions against "green-washing," where consumers are drawn to anything labeled "green." There's currently no green certification for nail salons in the United States, though groups like the Asian Law Caucus are trying to set a standard in California for green certification. The checklist would include: good ventilation, safer products, nail salon best practices, energy efficiency and fair labor standards.

A Seattle-area group is in the process of setting up green standards for nail salons as part of King County's EnviroStars green business program. Nail salons would receive a rating of two to five stars depending on their practices.

Self-marketed "green" or "organic" salons are sprouting up all over the country, but for now, there's little accountability.

"A lot of salons all around the country are incorporating green practices," says Sree Roy, managing editor of Nails Magazine. "This doesn't necessarily mean they are making huge changes."

Salons could be doing anything from recycling magazines to using energy-efficient light bulbs. People aren't even sure if some of the alternative products are safer because many ingredients haven't been tested for safety and manufacturers aren't required to label all ingredients.

Though they caution against green-washing, Ling and Tsan say salons like Isabella Nail Bar and Nova Nail Spa in San Francisco, also owned by Asian American entrepreneurs, are doing most things right. Nova even uses recycled denim for insulation.

Even as more salons go green, many probably won't. To ensure the safety of all nail salon workers, advocates believe the federal government should step in to regulate manufacturers, including banning harmful chemicals.

Without more laws to protect workers, more research about chemical exposure and standards for green nail salon businesses, people will have to rely on their own senses — and on entrepreneurs like Nguyen, whose goal is not just to make a living, but to make a statement. X

Momo Chang is a freelance writer based in Oakland, CA and a Hyphen editor. Her last story for Hyphen was about how life changed after 9/11 for some Asian Americans.

WHAT IS SB 484?

California State Senate Bill 484, the California Safe Cosmetics Act, was signed into law in 2005 to get around a loophole that allows manufacturers to hide ingredients on product labels under the guise of "fragrances," "color" or "flavors," for example. Under the California Safe Cosmetics Program, manufacturers that sell cosmetics — anything from deodorant to shampoo to lotion — in California will have to disclose whether their products contain chemicals that cause cancer or reproductive harm. The hope is that through pressure to disclose, manufacturers will make their products safer.

"There isn't anything quite like this in the country," says Michael DiBartolomeis, who runs the California Safe Cosmetics Program. "Full disclosure is a good concept. It can lead to a greener workplace and greener consumer products." DiBartolomeis expects to activate the reporting system in summer 2009 and believes the California program will set a precedent for the rest of the country and for other industries.

To find out more about the California Safe Cosmetics Program, go to www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/cosmetics.

H To learn more about nail salon and cosmetics safety, go to hyphenmagazine.com/take-action.